



Moral Values and Hypocrisy in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: A Literary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, focusing on its portrayal of moral values and hypocrisy. It examines how literature mirrors societal life and imparts moral lessons, delving into the novel's thematic intricacies, character developments, and narrative techniques. The study highlights the contrasting spectrum of moral values depicted in the story, encompassing both positive virtues and negative traits. Through meticulous examination, it underscores the educational value of literature, suggesting that engaging with literary works fosters critical thinking and moral development. Additionally, the paper discusses the broader implications of incorporating literature into education, emphasizing its potential to enhance language skills, vocabulary acquisition, and moral understanding. By analysing the moral dynamics and character portrayals in *The Scarlet Letter*, the research offers insights into how literature can serve as a tool for understanding and navigating complex moral landscapes. It proposes that literature, by reflecting and critiquing societal norms and behaviours, can be an essential component in education, aiding in the development of both intellectual and ethical faculties.

INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* stands as a profound exploration of morality, sin, and redemption set against the rigid Puritan backdrop of 17th-century New England. This novel intricately weaves the lives of its characters, particularly focusing on the repercussions of Hester Prynne's adultery, which symbolizes broader themes of guilt, hypocrisy, and societal judgment. Hawthorne's narrative not only scrutinizes the moral fabric of his characters but also reflects the complex interplay between personal transgression and communal ethics. This research article aims to delve into the nuanced moralities portrayed in *The Scarlet Letter*, analysing how these moral dynamics shape the characters' lives and offer insights into broader societal and educational contexts. Through a meticulous examination of the novel, this study seeks to uncover the multifaceted moral lessons embedded within Hawthorne's text, providing a framework for understanding and integrating these lessons into contemporary educational practices.

Moreover, *The Scarlet Letter* can be examined through the lens of geographical and psychological borders, which, although not directly addressed within the text, can be analogously linked to the historical partition of the Indian subcontinent. The novel's depiction of the physical and mental isolation of its characters mirrors the division experienced during the partition, which split not just lands but also identities and communities. This intersection of geographical and psychological borders highlights the broader implications of segregation and the enduring impacts of historical events on personal and collective consciousness. By situating Hawthorne's narrative within the broader context of post-colonial literature and identity formation, this study expands on existing research, offering new perspectives on how literature can reflect and challenge the constructs of geographical and psychological division.

By exploring these themes, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *The Scarlet Letter* not only narrates a story of personal sin and redemption but also serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues, making it a valuable text for both literary and historical analysis. This dual focus on the moral intricacies of the novel and the broader socio-historical context underscores the relevance of Hawthorne's work in contemporary discussions on morality, identity, and education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature serves as a vivid portrayal of life, offering a myriad of moral values that resonate with society, reflecting the interplay between individuals. Among various literary forms, the novel stands out for its intricate and artistic depiction of human experiences through detailed language. Through literature, readers delve into the depths of emotions, capturing moments and expressions of the heart and mind. Glickberg, as cited in Endraswara, underscores the profound social relevance inherent in all literary works, whether they explore fantastical or mystical realms. Indeed, literature sparks the imagination and enriches our understanding of the human condition, imparting valuable moral lessons along the way. In essence, literature emerges as a testament to human

creativity and experience, brimming with insights that guide us through life's complexities (77).

When individuals engage with a literary work, such as a novel, they establish a profound connection with the values embedded within its pages. Each reader brings a unique perspective to their interpretation, analysis, and understanding of the text. Consequently, diverse interpretations emerge, shaped by readers' distinct expectations and experiences. This multiplicity of viewpoints is intricately linked to the inherent characteristics and thematic complexities of the literary work itself. As readers navigate the intricacies of the narrative, they grapple with the realities presented therein, discerning layers of meaning that resonate with their own worldview. Thus, the act of reading becomes a dynamic process wherein readers negotiate between the text's inherent qualities and their individual insights, contributing to a rich tapestry of interpretations and understandings.

According to Wellek and Warren, the nature of literary works encompasses various facets, such as fiction, creativity, and imagination. However, the ideological underpinnings of literary works can vary depending on the perspective and ideological backdrop of the author. These works are situated at the intersection of innovation and the established conventions of the local community, making them a rich subject for comprehensive study and analysis. This understanding offers profound insights for both writers and readers, facilitating a deeper appreciation of the value and significance embedded within literary creations (18-20).

Furthermore, literature holds educational value, as exemplified by novels that impart valuable lessons for readers to grasp the messages conveyed by the author. Additionally, literary works serve as a wellspring of knowledge catering to readers' diverse needs, interests, cultural backgrounds, and language proficiencies. Many individuals are drawn to literary works such as novels, dramas, or poetry due to their thematic resonance with universal aspects of life, including themes of love, happiness, sorrow, and more. As Aristiawan says,

One of the example is a novel which bring some values for the reader to understand their message conveyed by the author. In another way literary work could be a source for readers as their need, interest, cultural background, and language levels. Most of people are interested with literary work like novel, drama or poetry because some of the reason which related with life, love, happiness and sorrow. (51)

According to Kenney (36), linguistics and literary criticism mutually enrich each other, as linguistic analysis contributes to literary criticism and vice versa. This intersection of disciplines is often referred to as stylistics, which bridges the gap between linguistics and literary studies. Stylistics serves as a connective framework linking various domains: linguistics and literary criticism, language and literature, and the disciplines of linguistics and literary criticism. Carter, as cited in Jeremy Hawthorn, suggests that examining literary

works through a linguistic lens is a stylistic practice. This approach posits that the analysis of literary texts begins with the premise that linguistic procedures form the foundation of interpretation (22).

The essence of a novel often mirrors the essence of its creator, reflecting the author's character and worldview. It serves as a canvas where real-life events intertwine with imagination, forming a narrative that resonates with readers. Characters, whether drawn from reality or conceived in fantasy, populate this world, lending authenticity to the storyline. Despite its fantastical elements, a novel remains grounded in believability, drawing from experiences that mirror everyday life. This credibility is essential, as it fosters trust between the reader and the narrative. Moreover, the unpredictability inherent in many novels fuels curiosity, enticing readers to unravel the mysteries within. This engagement prompts deep introspection, stimulating thought and emotion. Ultimately, the allure of a novel lies in its ability to offer respite from the chaos of daily life, providing moments of joy and escapism. Through the act of reading, one can embark on a journey of self-discovery, finding solace in the pages of a well-crafted story.

METHODOLOGY

To gather data, the researcher followed a systematic approach. Initially, they engaged in thorough and analytical reading of the novel "The Scarlet Letter" to gain deeper insight. Subsequently, the researcher selected specific content from the novel that aligned with the study's objectives, focusing on immoralities portrayed therein. This involved identifying key words or phrases that supported the analysis. Next, the researcher categorized the collected data to address the research questions effectively. Finally, they evaluated the relevance and reliability of the gathered information.

After meticulously gathering data and consulting various literary sources pertinent to the study, the researcher embarked on a detailed analysis following a structured methodology. Firstly, they discerned and extracted data relevant to the study's focal points. Secondly, the collected data was meticulously organized and sifted through, ensuring that only pertinent information aligned with the research objectives was utilized for analysis. These objectives primarily aimed at understanding the moral characterizations of the main characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and exploring the implications of these moralities on their daily lives. Thirdly, a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the data were conducted, delving deep into the nuances of the characters' moral dilemmas and actions portrayed in the novel. Each significant event was meticulously reviewed and scrutinized to elucidate its contribution to the study's objectives. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the synthesized findings, with a thorough reevaluation conducted to ensure the adequacy of the conclusions in addressing the research questions effectively.

DISCUSSION

When someone behaves in a way that contradicts our values, we often view them as somewhat inferior. This perception can hinder us from offering constructive criticism or addressing their “imperfections.” Acknowledging someone’s imperfections can sometimes be a way to adapt to certain situations. When Hester was publicly branded as an adulterer, it led others to adopt a more judgmental view of people in general. She became a symbol of moral failing, which damaged her social standing and caused significant harm to her mental and physical well-being.

“But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer -- so that both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time -- was that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.” (Hawthorne 61).

If we can accept that no one in this world is perfect, why can’t we also accept the existence of imperfect individuals? The punishment inflicted on Hester not only devastates her life but also reveals the sins of those who doubt her innocence. Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester’s partner in adultery, is a minister highly regarded by the community for guidance and direction. The people view him as nearly sinless, an ideal model to follow. The townspeople thought of him as “a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed, and an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of creed” (Hawthorne 122).

Will Dimmesdale, feeling the weight of his grave sin of adultery, take responsibility by stepping down from his position as a clergyman or confessing his sinful acts to the public? Alternatively, will Dimmesdale hide his sins and instead expose Hester’s in his sermons? A “true minister” would not conceal his own sinful actions from his congregation, as Dimmesdale did. By hiding his sins while condemning Hester for the same transgression, Dimmesdale exemplifies hypocrisy. How can one be punished for adultery when those around them are guilty of the same actions? The community of that time viewed adultery as a violation of ethics rather than a societal harm. Adultery is a deeply personal act involving only those directly involved. The church’s significant influence over the government was not in society’s best interest, as crimes against God’s will are not necessarily crimes against humanity. To some extent, every character exhibits hypocrisy. The townspeople and officials demonstrate this through their treatment of Hester. Their circumstances reveal the discrepancy between their professed beliefs and their actions.

Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can

thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?" (Hawthorne 26).

Hester urges Dimmesdale to publicly confess their adultery and reveal his involvement. She implores him not to be a hypocrite, as concealing the truth would damage his reputation and dignity as a religious leader. Despite Hester's insistence, Dimmesdale, resolute in his decision, refuses to disclose the affair to the public. The public's perception of this matter hinges on Dimmesdale's esteemed position as a prominent religious leader. Hester's response to Dimmesdale's steadfast refusal is shaped by his status and the potential repercussions of their shared secret remaining hidden.

Would not the people start up in their seats, by a simultaneous impulse, and tear him down out of the pulpit which he defiled? Not so, indeed! They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words. "The godly youth!" said they among themselves. "The saint on earth!" (Hawthorne 7).

Ultimately, Dimmesdale implicitly confessed his sins to his congregation, leaving them in disbelief. He admitted to being a flawed, irresponsible, and sinful individual. However, this confession elevated his standing among the people, portraying him as a more dignified and responsible person. By owning up to his actions, Dimmesdale regained respect and became a role model for his congregation. His humility and honesty reinforced his leadership. Conversely, had Dimmesdale chosen not to reveal the truth, he would have risked losing his credibility and status as a moral exemplar.

Nay; not so, my little Pearl!" answered the minister; for, with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon him; and he was already trembling at the conjunction in which – with a strange joy, nevertheless – he now found himself. "Not so, my child. I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother thee one other day, but not to-morrow!" (Hawthorne 17-28)

Behavior that violates ethical standards is often deemed deviant. Dimmesdale's hypocrisy is clearly highlighted in this context. He is deeply afraid of public exposure, revealing his cowardice, particularly in contrast to Hester's suffering. Pearl, with her keen perception, seems almost supernaturally insightful. If Pearl's character were removed from the story, the narrative would change significantly. Her presence is crucial in exposing the inconsistencies and moral failings of the other characters, particularly Dimmesdale. Without Pearl, the story would lose a critical element that underscores the central themes of hypocrisy, guilt, and redemption.

No, Hester, no!" replied the clergyman. "There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me! Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none! Else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat. Happy are you, Hester, which wear the Young

Goodman Brown openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!
Thou little know what a relief it is, after the torment of a seven
years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am!"
(Hawthorne 18)

Hypocrisy proves more challenging to forgive or overcome than a sin brought into the open. Hester emerges as a complex and central character, serving as the novel's protagonist. Originally from Old England, she enters into a marriage with Dr. Prynne, an older and educated man engrossed in scientific pursuits. However, Hester does not harbor love for him. Residing in New England, specifically Boston, Hester's husband remains in Amsterdam, having decided to relocate to Massachusetts. He sends Hester ahead to prepare for their new life while attending to essential matters himself.

Marry, good Sir, in some two years, or less, that the woman has been a dweller here in Boston, no tidings have come of this learned gentleman, Master Prynne; and his young wife, look you, being left to her own misguidance-- (Hawthorne 68).

Hester Prynne has scandalized the Puritan community of Boston by committing adultery. Two years prior to the events of the story, she is sent alone to America by her husband, Dr. Prynne, an elderly scientist, who appears to have vanished. The entire town is eager for Hester to reveal the identity of her secret lover, the father of her child Pearl. Hester's transgressions include adultery, hypocrisy, and a desire for revenge. Despite societal rejection, Hester exhibits a strong sense of guilt and attempts to atone for her actions. She bravely stands on the scaffold, enduring public humiliation, and wears the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her shame for the rest of her life. Over time, her once radiant beauty fades, obscured by the weight of her scarlet burden. Hester lives in a humble cottage on the outskirts of town, supporting herself and her daughter through needlework, while enduring the disdain of her fellow townspeople. Yet, she finds solace in her inner strength and resilience.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and discussions in the previous chapter, it is evident that Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" explores a spectrum of moral values, both positive and negative. Positive values such as love, wisdom, care, responsibility, regret, and self-confidence are juxtaposed with negative traits like arrogance, greed, complaint, and avarice. While the story serves as a guide on how to embody positive moral values, it also warns against the repercussions of negative attitudes. "The Scarlet Letter" thus offers valuable lessons on morality, which can be applied in daily life and integrated into education. By engaging with the narrative, students not only gain entertainment but also extract moral messages that foster critical thinking and vocabulary development. Incorporating literature like "The Scarlet Letter" into English language teaching provides students with opportunities to analyze literary works, enhancing their language skills and moral understanding.

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